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ABSTRACT

The literary theorist Terry Eagleton believes that literary study is the study of human discourse. To build on his idea for use in the classroom, it must first be assumed that literature constitutes a dialogue between the work (and its author) and the reader. The dialogue process can be introduced in a 2- to 4-week unit through a cluster of literary works that everyone will read. First, the students do their initial reading and make journal entries for all works. The teacher then establishes a format for dividing the students into dialogue groups--always by pairs, but allowing for frequent rotation, so that there is interaction among all the students. Once these preliminary steps have been taken, it is time for the student to "crack the codes" of the work: the language code (word meaning), the social code (identification of the geographical settings and speculation about the social values expressed), and the genre code (each genre has certain conventions that must be understood). Once individual students have refined their own approach to the work through journal writing, they should begin a structured dialogue with another student. For the final step in the process, extension of the dialogue to a larger audience, students write a paper and read to the group for comment and constructive criticism. (NKA)

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Teaching Literature as Dialogue: Coming to Terms with Terry Eagleton

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Background

In his book Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), Terry Eagleton makes the assertion that literary study, as it has been commonly conceived, should be abolished and that it should be replaced by a much older, more traditional form of analysis: rhetoric or discourse (see esp. 205-213). In this book, Eagleton arguably discounts what we might call the "personally transformative" power of literature in favor of a deeper immersion of literary study in social and political concerns. But his belief that literary study should be, at heart, a study of human discourse is provocative. How can we, as teachers of literature at the secondary- or high-school level, apply such a concept to our own practice as teachers? Would adopting the idea that literary theory is really discourse or rhetorical theory mean that our background in literary study up to this point would simply have to be discarded? I should hope not. On the contrary, in this brief discussion, I will try to demonstrate that we can come to terms with literature as discourse without necessarily abandoning any of our more familiar approaches to literary study: that, while we may have to shift our context slightly, we can still come to literature as a reading experience capable of powerful personal transformation.

In doing so, we need to establish several assumptions about literature as discourse. The centerpiece among these assumptions is the conviction that literature constitutes a dialogue. Literature, as dialogue, forms a recurring cycle of statement and response between the literary work (and its author) and the reader. As part of this assumption, then, literary works are viewed not just as fixed or static objects, but as part of an interaction between the text

given to us by the author and the reader. One of the extensions we will make to this process — it will be discussed further below — is that this interaction between text and reader can and should involve, especially in a classroom setting, other readers and groups of readers.

A second assumption about literature as discourse is that literary works assume the status of <u>verbal persons</u>: they become, in a sense, people almost like us, with whom we can interact, and, up to a point, communicate. For instance, it is very useful to view works of fiction as storytellers: they can be personified as people who tell us stories. To be sure, works of fiction also have "people" in them (their narrators and characters): but we are thinking of the whole work of fiction (personified especially through its narrator) as a storyteller. Such a personification helps the reader perceive the work less as a cold, static object and more as an interaction. It also helps the reader engage the literary work in a way which can energize the "storytelling" component of the human psyche — a universal pattern or archetype which in itself expresses the importance of dialogue in human experience.

In addition, poems — especially shorter lyric poems — can also undergo a simliar personification. The can be viewed as sages, gurus, shamans — especially wise persons whose major function is to share with us moments of enlightenment or insight. These moments may sometimes, it is true, be embedded in a narrative or "story" context, but in lyric poetry the focus is almost always on the momentary insight, the sudden illumination or enlightenment (or enlightening). Once again, the poem's insightful quality expresses a universal or archetypal portion of our psyche: this time the mind's need, in most people, to enrich life through discovering or disclosing insights — another aspect of our continual discourse with ourselves and with our experience.

A related assumption flowing from the conviction that literature is a form of discourse: interacting with works of literature should become a kind of

quest for the reader. The reader-work interaction (and the later interaction with other readers) are both, at best, a kind of "seeking out" of other persons, an attempt to get to know other people and where they stand. This situation ideally necessitates a serious commitment to the process of reading on the part of all readers.

Finally, literature as dialogue gently insists that we approach the reading process as conscious of our own biases and prejudices as possible — conscious that we will always bring our own "emotional context" to our reading, and that, if we are to achieve genuine communication, we need to make an effort to listen carefully to what the other parties to our dialogue (including both the work and other readers) have to say. As Carl Rogers has said in On Becoming A Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961):

> .... [T]he major barrier to mutual interpersonal communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve or disapprove, the statement of the other person, or the other group.... Real communication occurs, and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding. (330-331)

"Listening with understanding" may seem impossible or impractical when we are reading a literary work, but, as I hope to suggest below, making the effort to hear what the other person is saying, including what the text of the literary work seems to be trying to express, is the crucial first step to dialogue with literature.

The Dialogue Prosess

Summary of Procedures

Before embarking on a discussion of the dialogue process itself, teachers might welcome some description of a possible classroom context in which the dialogue process might be used. First, of course, it will be helpful if the class is already somewhat familiar with journal writing (see below for a

reference). Secondly, the dialogue process can probably best be introduced in a short unit of two to four weeks in duration — though of course this time can be lengthened or shortened to fit particular needs.

Whatever the length of time, it is important to introduce students to this kind of dialogue through a "packet" or "cluster" of literary works that everyone will read during the project. Depending on the time available and the size of the class, students might be each given a portfolio of the same works, or be assigned the same works from a text. It is probably most useful, for purposes of the dialogue, to assign short works for this project: shorter lyric poems and shorter short stories work best to introduce the dialogue concept. There is no reason why, however, that at a later stage longer stories, plays, and even novels could not be approached through the dialogue process.

To assist clarity of discussion, the "packet" of works might be centered around one theme or focus, such as "Love and Death," "Innocence and Experience," "Conformity and Rebellion."

Students then need to be given time to do their initial reading of the works. They should make journal entries (discussed below) for all works, and they should be urged to read each work a number of times, a point that is also stressed below. Some of this reading can of course be done outside of class, but some "reading sessions" might be held in class so that the teacher can have brief conferences with each student.

Once students are ready to begin dialogues with each other, the teacher needs to establish a format for dividing students into pairs. A very helpful procedure is to set up a system of rotation so that students wil not be "permanently bonded" into the same dialogue pair. Students should be able to share the dialogue process with as many other students as possible. One useful format: divide the class up into groups of four to six students (the number must be divisible by two). Each group will break up into successive dialogue

pairs until each student has been able to talk to at least one and possibly two others.

If the class is first divided into dialogue groups, each group can also discuss one work at a time (if there are four groups, four works can be under discussion at once). In this way, each student gets to hear the views of more than one other student on the same work.

Rotation of students between groups is also possible, so that each group is "seeded" by new individuals at frequent intervals, for example as a group begins to discuss a new work. However the dialogue format is established, the important things are to keep the rotational sequence moving and to, at the same time, provide sufficient time for each dialogue to take place. Setting arbitrary time limits that are too short can frustrate the process. As a rule of thumb, teachers should try to provide each dialogue pair with at least five to seven minutes for discussion.

When the groups have completed their dialogues on a selection of works, each group can be asked to summarize the positions of individual members and pairs. In this way, the process can benefit from the advantages both of dialogue and of larger group discussion.

Finally, teachers may find it practical, in addition to describing the dialogue process, to schedule practice dialogues in front of the class. These cna be done with student volunteers, or with the teacher forming one-half of the dialogue.

1. Reading the Work

This first component of the dialogue ideally puts all of the assumptions discussed above into play: the reader, we hope, comes to the work prepared to view it as another person, and ready to listen with understanding. As a first step, this listening process demands multiple readings of each work. Secondly,

as he or she reads the work, the student should be prepared to express the dialogue with the work in the form of short journal entries. Depending on the teacher's plans, it may not be necessary to keep an elaborate or lengthy reading journal -- but some means for students to carry on a "writing dialogue" with the work should be discussed in advance. Classes which have already worked with journal writing should have little or no trouble with the journal format, and may already be familiar with some of the basic journal techniques: the list, the brainstorm, the reporter's formula, the loop, and so on. Teachers unfamiliar with these journal techniques might wish to consult the second edition of Elizabeth Cowan Neeld's Writing (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1986).

In any case, once some groundwork for journal writing has been established, students should be ready to begin the process of dialogue with the work.

Step 1: Cracking the Code:

This step assumes that literature, like other forms of communication, is expressed in a variety of codes with which the reader must achieve some familiarity in order to understand what is being said. The student's first task is to make an effort to "decode": to understand that the work under discussion contains these codes and that they need to be explained. Three basic codes demand the student's attention:

The Language Code: at the most obvious level, the student is confronted with words he or she may not know: what do these words mean? A list of unfamiliar words can be made and checked against a dictionary. Likewise, sentence structures which seem unusually complex or difficult to read can be identified for attention, either in a later re-reading or in discussion with others. (Note: as a general principle, it is necessary to read any literary work more than once: as "verbal persons," works can be known well only by

The Social Code: students first need to identify the apparent geographical and cultural settings of stories and poems. From what historical period? A contemporary setting? Then they need to speculate about the social values they find expressed in the work: a particular attitude toward family, marriage, career, death? Often, connections can be drawn (frequently as a result of re-reading and discussion) between language and values: for instance, the relationship between the term "property" and a whole complex of values surrounding marriage and wealth which can be perceived in the novels of Jane Austen. Even if students don't get involved that deeply at the outset, they should use their journals to at least sketch in an outline of the physical or geographical setting and of major cultural values which appear to be present.

The Genre Code: students need to be familiar with the concept of genre, and that each genre has certain features or conventions which must be understood before the dialogue can proceed much further. They should realize that conventions may change over time: for instance, the conventions for Greek tragedy differ considerably from the conventions, implicit or otherwise, which may be seen in modern tragedies such as Death of a Salesman. Or contrasts may be drawn between Renaissance or 18th Century English poetry and contemporary poetry: conventions affect not only metrics and rhyme, but also subject matter and theme. All of these genre-related issues would, of course, normally be addressed in some fashion in any literature course: the only requirement here is that students be reasonably familiar with the concept before they begin their dialogue project. Naturally, students need not be conversant with every nuance of technique: they do need to be familiar with the basic components of the more common genres, such as fiction and poetry.

To begin their dialogue with the genre of a particular work, e.g., a lyric poem, students may first identify the genre and then ask what they might expect to find in a literary work of that type. At first glance, such a question might

seem irrelevant -- but students will soon discover that a lyric poem may possess a number of conventions or features — for example, a speaker, imagery, fixed or varied line length, rhythm, various figures of speech, especially metaphor -- which become intimately connected with the poem's meaning. Conventions of genre, then, are not merely lists of rules or devices designed to torment students, but actually become part and parcel of what the literary work is trying to say and do. In the case of a short story, for instance, the narrator, other characters, plot, and setting — all of them common conventions of fiction -- can, after some thought and discussion, be perceived by students as exponents of meaning: part of the way the literary work carries on its dialogue with the reader.

Step 2: Making Sense

The journal responses of Step 1 should provide the student reader with some strong background for the step that many literary theorists regard as the most essential activity of reading: making sense of the text. This difficult process needs to be approached with respect and tact: the reader, obviously, has to consider his or her own frame of reference as well as the frame of reference which has been established by the text. In making sense of a text, the dialogue with literature reaches its full significance. The reader and the text must interact meaningfully and not casually, in a way which can help the reader articulate two aspects of meaning: what significant attitude toward human experience does this work express, and how does it do this in a coherent, orderly way? A series of short journal questions can help students approach these two aspects of meaning:

What do you think this work's central meaning or purpose is? This crucial response should not be in one or two words. Students should be encouraged to attempt a response of at least one or two complete sentences -- even if this

might be a provisional response which would be revised after further reading and discussion.

What features of this work help support this meaning? This aspect of meaning should not be omitted for a number of reasons. First, it askes the student to "touch base" with the work — including the work's "codes" we just mentioned — constantly during the process of interpretation, thus minimizing the risk of formulating meanings grounded solely on "gut-level" responses. While such personal responses are clearly essential, what W.H. Auden calls "passionate attention" -- continued and intense contact with the work — is vital if the reader/work dialogue is to be maintained. Secondly, this question can help illustrate the work's unity or coherence, and can also show how generic features of the work — for instance, the speaker of a poem, the narrator of a short story — might help express the meaning. Finally, it is important to preserve real dialogue with the work.

What aspects of your own values and experience do you find reflected or challenged in this work? We will always test our interpretations against our own experience in a kind of dialogue with ourselves. We need to decide, even implicitly, how our own personal frame of reference — including our own personal history as well as the cultural world in which we live -- relates to this or that particular work of literature. In doing so, as most of us realize, there are some pitfalls: first, the one mentioned above, that we might interpret the work entirely in terms of our own experience, without letting the work have its "say." This difficulty can usually be alleviated by making a conscious effort, as just discussed, to never lose sight of the work. A second pitfall, especially for younger students, is that the work at first may seem to depict human activity which is outside the range of their own direct experience. In this case, obviously, it is difficult for them to see how their own experience might be reflected or challenged. It is here that the journal process can be helpful: journal exercises such as loops or

brainstorms can help students grapple with the hard question of how the work may reflect or challenge their own beliefs. However students may confront their own experience, they need to be aware that dialogue with themselves is as crucial as the dialogue with the work.

2. Talking About the Work: Two Speakers

Talking about the work in the form of a dialogue between pairs of students is a second major component of establishing the literary work as a dialogue. Once individual students have refined their own approach to the work, through both of the journal steps in the previous section, they should be able to begin a fruitful dialogue with another student. While the journal approach can remain somewhat unstructured -- as long as the basic questions are addressed — the dialogue between individual readers requires more structure. A dialogue format should be set up which tries to avoid random talk or "shooting the breeze" as much as possible. No one denies that some random conversation may be helpful, but it should not dominate the dialogue process.

A very useful principle for this dialogue is the one enunciated by Carl Rogers and alluded to above: "listen with understanding." Dialogues which begin with this principle in mind usually end with both parties sharing a helpful mutual understanding of the work. Tactically, the easiest way to put this principle into practice in the dialogue is to ask each student to take a turn as an interlocutor or questioner who asks the other student, as respondent, to clarify his or her position as completely as possible. As the process begins, each student should have a copy of the work and his or her journal notes within reach.

Step 1: Sharing the Meaning

The student selected to be the first questioner should remind himself or herself that he or she is first trying to understand the other student's position as completely and clearly as possible. A series of close-ended

questions based on an initial query about meaning can help the other student articulate his or her position. For example, after an opening exchange of comments designed to "break the ice," the questioner may ask:

Can you tell me what you think the meaning of this work is for you?

Depending on the response to this question, follow-up questions may be necessary, such as:

I don't quite understand. Could you go into that a bit more?

Throughout this questioning process, the respondent should not merely sit passively and wait to be questioned, but should be encouraged to assist the dialogue process with questions of his or her own, such as:

Is that clear? Can I explain that further to you?

Once the questioner feels that the respondent has explained his or her position, then the questioner should briefly summarize what he or she feels that position is:

I'm going to recap your position now. Will you correct me if I state it incorrectly?

Once the questioner and respondent are comfortable with the way the meaning has been stated and restated, they should move on to Step 2.

Step 2: Sharing Backgrounds to Meaning

In this section of the dialogue, the questioner may wish to ask more open-ended questions. The goal is to try to discover why the respondent has reached this particular conclusion about meaning. Two sets of questions (with appropriate follow-up questions) are usually helpful:

Can you explain what it is in this work which leads you to this conclusion?

How about examples from the work? Are there factors in your own experience

or frame of reference which have helped lead you to this conclusion?

Examples?

Note that these questions are designed to lead the respondent both into some discussion of the work and of his or her personal background: a way of getting him or her to relate more specifically to the journal work in the first section. Once again, follow-up questions should become part of this discussion as needed:

How does this example relate to the work again?

Could you talk a bit more about this incident in you life?

Also, before the sharing of backgrounds is complete, the questioner should ideally try to summarize the background of the respondent as he or she has perceived it. Again, this will give the respondent an opportunity to clarify and expand this background.

Now the questioner/respondent roles should be reversed, and the new questioner should work through the same two steps just outlined above.

Step 3: Building a Consensus

This final dialogue step, which may be very brief or rather extended, depending on the situation, is designed to give both parties the opportunity reach consensus on their respective positions — or, if that seems to be impossible, to agree that they must disagree. Two options seem possible under this step:

Option A: Agreement or Minor Disagreement -- both parties discover that they agree substantially, even though some of their personal background material or their interpretation of small details may differ. Very little further discussion may appear necessary, in which case they may wish to spend a few minutes reiterating or reinforcing their positions.

Option B: Substantial Disagreement — if the two parties discover that they have major areas of disagreement, for example about their views of a work's

basic meaning, they need to first decide on the basis of their disagreement:

— Is their disagreement based on "code" issues within the work? For instance, do they disagree over the function of a metaphor, the meanings of particular words, the use of a speaker or narrator, the symbolism of a setting?

— Is their disagreement based on differences in the personal frames of reference they bring to the work? For instance, does one student usually view winter as pessimistic, and another as optimistic, no matter what may happen in the work?

— Is their disagreement based on what appears to be a genuine ambiguity within the work? Can the language of a poem, for instance, be interpreted in two ways?

Once the students decide on the basis for their disagreement, it usually is less difficult to discuss a possible consensus, or to agree to disagree. In the Appendix of this paper, a sample dialogue based on William Carlos Williams's "To Awaken An Old Lady" demonstrates how consensus can be reached when there is substantial initial disagreement. Discussion of another poem also included in the Appendix, Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," should demonstrate how readers of a poem may finally agree to disagree about a poem which seems to support more than one interpretation.

3. Writing About the Work: The Wider Audience

Clearly, the final component of approaching literature as dialogue should be to extend this dialogue to a larger audience in the form of writing. This section, without going into extensive detail, will outline a possible approach:

Step 1: Topics and First Drafts — teachers may wish to base topics on what has developed in the first two components: individual journal writing and dialogue. They may wish to ask students to refine topics for writing by various invention heuristics (again, journal-writing strategies such as the loop or the brainstorm are very useful). Then teachers may assign first drafts individually

and confer individually (or with dialogue pairs for a given work) as first drafts are being written. In any case, a conference with individual students or with pairs is highly recommended before students complete their first drafts.

Step 2: Reading First Drafts to Groups — the class can be divided into groups of three to five students. Each student then reads his or her draft to the group for comment and constructive critique. Each student should read his or her paper aloud to the group at least once. (Two readings are recommended if time permits, assuming that papers will be fairly short.) If two readings are possible, other students in the group should make no comments until after the conclusion of the second reading. Students can be provided with a response sheet which they will fill with comments (to be handed to the student reader later). But there should also be some further dialogue between the reader and members of the group. This dialogue might cover a range of comments from requests for clarification through suggestions for improvement to praise for writing done well.

Step 3: Final Drafts -- if it is feasible, teachers should find it helpful to see that each student gets a copy of all final drafts from the dialogue project. These might be kept in a portfolio or folder, and selected final drafts might be presented aloud to the whole class, or submitted for possible inclusion in a school literary magazine.

Appendix 1

A Dialogue: William Carlos Williams's "To Waken An Old Lady"

Student A: What do you think the meaning of this poem is?

Student B: Well, I think it's about the coldness of winter...how tough winter is, especially on little birds who have no place to go and not much to eat.

A: Are you saying that the poem is about winter and its effect on just birds? Would you include people?

B: Right, people too. Winter is hard on everyone. I suppose you could say the birds are like people in a way... everybody suffers in winter.

A: Do you want to add anything to that?

B: No, I guess that's about it.

A: OK, so you think the poem is about winter and how hard winter is on everybody.

B: Right.

A: What is there in the poem which helps you find that meaning?

B: I guess all the stuff about bare trees and the snow glaze. Also the wind — there's a dark wind — they're buffeted by it — buffeted means tossed around, I know. Also, all they have to eat are seeds left over from last year.

A: OK, what about your own life? Would you say there's anything in your life which contributes to your meaning here? What about winter? Do you like winter?

B: I hate winter! It's my least favorite season...I should really live in the tropics... I could lie out in the sun all day on some beach. You're right, I really relate to winter poems.

A: So, you think the images of winter in the poem, the bare trees and so on, help you understand the poem, and also your feelings about winter help too?

B: Yep. Should I ask you questions now?

A: Sure.

B: Well, tell me what you think the poem means.

A: To me it's about winter all right, but I see a connection between old age and winter. Old age is like winter, but not winter in a sad or depressing way. The birds seem to be OK. It's like they can find something good in winter. If the birds are like old people...then maybe old age is not so bad.

B: Oh, you think the poem is really about old age and not just winter? And how winter might not be all bad...or how old age might not be so bad?

A: Yeah, that comes pretty close.

B: Well, I guess I don't see that so well. What is there in the poem that makes you think this way?

A: I guess I saw the first line -- "Old age is" -- it tries to draw a connection between old age and the birds.

B: Oh, I see that now. Well, what about winter being such a good thing?

A: Well, it's because the birds seem to find plenty to eat. They aren't starving. Even though it's windy and cold they seem to be happy. I was thinking about "shrill piping of plenty" at the end of the poem — there must be enough to eat for them. The poem starts out sort of dark, but splits in the middle — "But what?"

B: OK — that helps. Then you think this poem is really about old age... anything in your own life that has a bearing here? Do you like winter?

A: Actually, not all that much. I don't hate it, though. I like to go cross-country skiing. I guess winter is not really so bad. You could find sonething good in it.

B: So, you think some lines in the poem help with the idea that the poem is really about old age and that old age is not so bad. Also, you think winter is not really such a bad season?

A: That comes pretty close.

B: OK, then, I think we're supposed to talk about agreement or consensus now. I could see where we were disagreeing at first. I really thought this poem was just about winter and how bad it is. Maybe I'm not so far apart from you now.

A: You mean you can see how this poem is about old age?

B: Sure, and how old age is not really so bad. Winter here probably represents old age, or rather, I suppose the flight of little birds do that.

A: Yeah, I agree with that.

B: And another thing I didn't see at first: the title of the poem. "To Waken An Old Lady." I couldn't figure that out at first. What if it refers to an old lady Williams kenw who was upset about being old?

A: Yeah, or maybe she had kind of fallen into a daze and he was trying to stir her up... yeah, that's a good point. I hadn't thought about the title either.

B: Well, I guess we're basically agreed, right?

A: Right. Are you going to the game Friday night?

TO WAKEN AN OLD LADY

— William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

Old age is
a flight of small
cheeping birds
skimming
bare trees
above a snow glaze.
Gaining and failing
they are buffeted
by a dark wind —
But what?
On harsh weedstalks
the flock has rested,
the snow
is covered with broken
seedhusks
and the wind tempered
by a shrill
piping of plenty.

Appendix 2

Poem for Discussion

A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL

— William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears —
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Some Factors for Discussion:

1. Place this poem in the context of other similar poems by Wordsworth.

2. Identify the speaker of the poem. Identify "she."

3. Identify at least two possible interpretations of the poem. Which one, if any, seems more probable? Why? If two interpretations appear to be viable, can they be reconciled?